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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 HANOI 002289

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OES/STC (MGOLDBERG), OES/IHA (DSINGER AND NCOMMELLA)
BANGKOK FOR RMO, CDC, USAID/RDM/A (MFRIEDMAN)
USDA FOR FAS/PASS TO APHIS
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE FOR OSD/ISA/AP (LSTERN)
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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S AVIAN INFLUENZA SITUATION - SEPTEMBER 1, 2005

REF: (A) STATE 153802 (B) HANOI 1729 (C) HCMC 855 (D) HCMC 891

1. (U) This cable is the first in a series of weekly reports requested in reftel A. Avian influenza (AI) issues and developments in Vietnam were previously reported in ref B and C.

2. (SBU) Summary: Vietnamese press reported a fatal case of the H5 strain was discovered August 28 in a district near Hanoi, likely from handling poultry, but World Health Organization (WHO) officials here have not yet been able to confirm this with the GVN. WHO and Government of Vietnam (GVN) officials also confirmed this week that the H5N1 AI virus killed, for the first time, three Owston civet cats, in addition to its continued impact on the human and bird populations in Vietnam. GVN has taken several steps to begin large-scale poultry vaccination programs in rural areas as well as in Hanoi (ref D), and has developed an Action Plan in an attempt to coordinate GVN response to a larger outbreak. Other nations continue to provide technical assistance to the GVN and are working to coordinate their own response planning. The GVN currently faces several obstacles in their efforts to combat AI: poor communication with rural areas, poor interagency cooperation, and lack of funding for prevention projects. End Summary.

Latest Developments: Impact on People

3. (U) On September 1, Vietnamese press reported a fatal case of H5 had occurred earlier in the week in Soc Son, a district on the outskirts of Hanoi. A Ministry of Health (MOH) official reportedly claimed that the victim likely contracted AI from handling an infected chicken. No other details regarding the case are available at this time. The WHO representative told us that he had not received any information formally or informally about this case. Noting that the testing described in the article has not yet been completed, he said that it would be premature to make any judgment on the exact cause of death.

4. (U) On August 5, 2005 the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported three new human cases of H5N1 AI since our last report in reftel B, two of which are fatalities. One case occurred in Ha Tay Province, another in Tra Vinh Province, and a third in Ho Chi Minh City. The cases in Tra Vinh Province and Ho Chi Minh City did not survive.

5. (U) These recent incidents bring the total number of confirmed human cases reported by the WHO in Vietnam since December 2003 to 90, with 40 deaths. There have been 63 cases, with 20 deaths, since December 2004. There have been 112 total cases in Southeast Asia.

Latest Developments: Impact on Animals

6. (U) An important development this past week is the discovery that three Owston civet cats in Cuc Phuong National Park (Ninh Binh Province, 120km south of Hanoi) died of the H5N1 strain of AI after eating infected poultry meat. This is the first incident of its kind, indicating a new species susceptible to the disease. According to press reports, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Representative in Vietnam, Anton Rychener, verified that blood samples sent to Hong Kong confirmed the cause of death. The animals died in June 2005, though the cause of death has just been announced.

7. (U) According to August 17, 2005 press reports, the

National Steering Committee for Bird Flu Prevention and Control has determined that since April 1, 2005, AI outbreaks have been reported in 19 different farms located in eight provinces or cities. No other details were available.

18. (U) The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) recently announced that nationwide, almost 44 million poultry died or were destroyed between December 2003 and November 2004, while only two million poultry have perished since December 2004.

19. (U) The press reported August 29, 2005 that MARD warned that 50 percent of waterfowl transported into Hanoi and 10 percent of those being raised there test positive for the H5N1 strain. We have no data to verify this information. There are approximately 4.2 million poultry and waterfowl in Hanoi.

Vietnam's Efforts

10. (U) Most prominent among the GVN's efforts to combat AI is the new poultry vaccination program, the pilot for which is progressing rather slowly. On August 5, 2005, MARD began vaccinating poultry in the northern province of Nam Dinh and the Mekong Delta province of Tien Giang to determine the efficacy of recently purchased vaccinations from China and the Netherlands. As of August 25, 2005, MARD confirmed they had only vaccinated 72 percent of the communes in Nam Dinh and 30 percent of those in Tien Giang. Reftel D reports in detail on the program in Tien Giang.

11. (U) This past week MARD announced it also began a poultry vaccination pilot program in Hanoi. This program will be expanded into a mass vaccination campaign scheduled to start between September 15-30. To date, the GVN has invested USD 21 million in an effort to slow the spread of the virus.

12. (U) According to recent press reports, MARD has proposed a total ban on the slaughter of live poultry in Hanoi's markets beginning in July 2006.

13. (U) In addition to these vaccination efforts, the MOH has prepared an Action Plan on Influenza A/H5N1 Prevention and Control, which was previously passed by Embassy Hanoi to officials at the Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). A copy has also been sent to State. The plan provides a general blueprint of primarily MOH responsibilities and activities for responding to an AI epidemic. It also briefly outlines the roles and responsibilities of other GVN ministries but does not explain how inter-ministerial activities will be coordinated during an epidemic to mount an effective response.

Third Country Efforts

14. (U) Equally important in Vietnam are the efforts of other countries, including those of the United States, to combat the H5N1 strain of AI. Technical assistance, political support and response planning have all been a critical part of these efforts.

15. (U) The United States has offered significant technical assistance to the GVN, which is scheduled to take place through a USD 400,000 USDA training program. The funding for this program comes from the FY2004 monetization of a USDA food aid program. USDA and MARD are currently working on a training plan. However, the Ministry of Finance (MOF), in particular, has concerns with the way in which the program will be implemented by USDA. It remains unclear at present when the program will begin. FAS Hanoi and USDA continue efforts to resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

16. (U) The WHO and the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology (NIHE), a part of Vietnam's MOH, recently requested and received assistance from a team of outside vaccine experts who visited the scientists involved in the development of a human AI vaccine. This was a follow-up to a WHO consultation conducted earlier in the year. The team was generally pleased with the progress of the vaccine development process. Specific recommendations from the team were submitted to NIHE and to the WHO.

17. (U) The Ambassador met July 12, 2005 with MARD Minister Cao Duc Phat to discuss U.S. concerns over the spread of AI and Vietnamese efforts to combat the disease. This discussion was followed by the August 14-17, 2005 visit of HHS Assistant Secretary for Public Health Preparedness Stewart Simonson, who met with senior officials from both MOH and MARD to explore new areas of cooperation in

combating the disease.

118. (SBU) The diplomatic community in Hanoi continues to actively review its response plans in case of a larger epidemic. The most recent of these events took place on August 30, 2005, when U.S. Embassy Hanoi's Management Counselor and its Consular Section Chief participated in a luncheon roundtable discussion on AI organized by the British Embassy. Representatives from other embassies and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) also participated, and discussion centered on tripwires, draw-down planning and evacuation logistics.

119. (U) Finally, on September 6, 2005, WHO will host a briefing open to the entire diplomatic community to discuss and coordinate efforts to combat the disease as well as response plans to larger outbreaks.

Vietnam's Obstacles -----

120. (SBU) Internally, the GVN's largest obstacle to effective disease prevention and control remains coordination between the different ministries and organizations involved. Communication in rural areas is also a significant problem.

121. (U) The GVN also faces some funding obstacles to address much-needed prevention education in rural areas. The Vietnamese Poultry Association (VPA) has approached the Foreign Agriculture Service (FAS) in Hanoi with a proposal for a Vietnamese-language instructional film on AI prevention and sustainable development for the poultry industry. Experts from MARD, MOH and the VPA would participate. They propose to distribute copies of the film on a CD to extension agents in each province.

122. (U) The Embassy will provide USD 1,500 to produce the film but additional funds of USD 4,800 are still needed to produce 12,800 CD diskettes.
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